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Belarus: An Overview

In 2020, protests against allegedly widespread electoral fraud and a brutal crackdown on protestors led to the rise of a mass opposition movement in Belarus, on a scale unseen since the country became independent in 1991 (Belarus previously was part of the Soviet Union). The protests emerged in the wake of Belarus's August 2020 presidential election, during which opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya mounted an unexpectedly strong campaign against Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus for more than 26 years.

Human rights activists and monitors report that during the crackdown more than 33,000 Belarusians have been temporarily detained or imprisoned and that currently 360, including more than 45 women, are political prisoners. At least 10 demonstrators and others have been killed or died in custody or under suspicious circumstances.

The United States, the European Union (EU), the U.N. Human Rights Council, and others have called for an end to the crackdown and for the government to conduct a dialogue with the opposition and to hold free and fair presidential elections.

Political Background

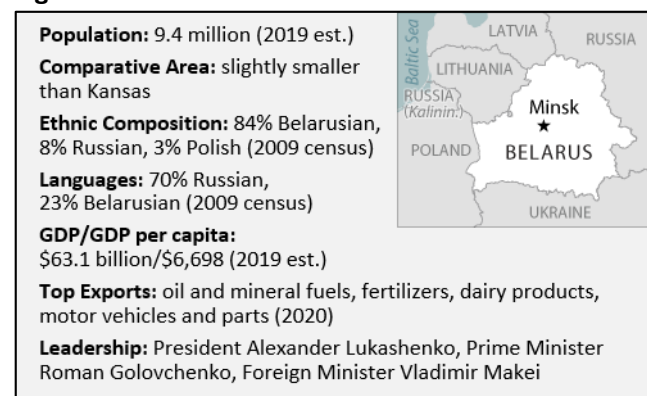
In past years, observers debated whether Lukashenko could be encouraged to preside over a “softer” and more development-oriented authoritarian regime, but political openings in Belarus were modest and short-lived. Prior to the 2020 election, Lukashenko appeared to be interested in tightening Belarus's authoritarian system. In 2019 elections, pro-government candidates won all 110 seats in the lower house of Belarus's legislature. In 2020, Lukashenko appointed an official from the security sector as prime minister.

From May 2020, Belarusian authorities tried, but failed, to suppress an unexpectedly energetic electoral opposition. Tsikhanouskaya was a political novice who entered the race after her spouse, Siarhei Tsikhanousky, a popular anti-government video blogger, was denied candidate registration when he and dozens of other government critics were in temporary detention. After his initial release, Tsikhanousky was arrested again while collecting signatures for his wife's candidacy; he remains in prison.

Tsikhanouskaya became the united opposition candidate after two prominent potential candidates were denied registration. On the campaign trail, Tsikhanouskaya pledged to be a transitional figure who would reintroduce democracy to Belarus. One denied candidate's campaign manager, Mariya Kalesnikava, and the spouse of another denied candidate, Veranika Tsapkala, joined her on the campaign. The three women attracted tens of thousands to demonstrations.

Given Lukashenko's authoritarian rule, observers did not expect Tsikhanouskaya to win the election. However, the official pronouncement that Lukashenko won with an evidently exaggerated 80% of the vote (to 10% for Tsikhanouskaya) quickly led to protests. The brutal crackdown that followed led to larger protests that many observers characterized as “leaderless” and sometimes attracted hundreds of thousands. Protests subsequently dwindled in frequency and size, but activists adopted new methods of protest and engagement.

Figure 1. Belarus at a Glance



Sources: World Bank; Trade Data Monitor.

Exile, imprisonment, and persecution have imposed challenges for the opposition. Tsikhanouskaya left Belarus after she was detained and threatened with imprisonment. From neighboring Lithuania, Tsikhanouskaya formed a Coordination Council to help lead the opposition. Five of the council's seven senior members were detained after it was established. In September 2020, former campaign manager Kalesnikava was abducted and dispatched to the Belarus-Poland border. She was imprisoned after she refused to leave the country. Kalesnikava and another council member, Maxim Znak, remain in prison. Others have left Belarus.

The opposition has organized various actions to increase pressure on the government of Belarus and to secure international attention. The opposition has been supported by a network of former law enforcement officials who reportedly quit their jobs in protest (or were dismissed) and who seek to expose alleged government crimes, including against opposition figures and protesters. The opposition also has been supported by members of Belarus's once-burgeoning information and communications technology (ICT) industry, many of whom have left the country together with several ICT companies.

Relations with the West

The United States, the EU, and others have condemned state-sponsored violence against protestors and detainees in

Belarus and the widening crackdown. U.S. officials have conveyed support for the Belarusian people's "right to free and fair elections" and called on authorities to "engage in meaningful dialogue with the Coordination Council and Belarusian civil society." The European Council, composed of the leaders of EU member states, stated the EU does "not recognize the results" of the 2020 election.

In December 2020, the 116th Congress passed and the President signed into law the Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-260, Division FF, Title III). The act amends the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 (22 U.S.C. §5811 note). Among other things, the act states it is the policy of the United States to reject the "invalid results" of the 2020 presidential elections. The Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, as amended, grants the President authority to impose sanctions on persons in Belarus for human rights abuses and for undermining democracy. In the 117th Congress, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Res. 124, supporting the people of Belarus and their democratic aspirations.

Since 2008, the United States has had no ambassador and a limited diplomatic presence in Belarus, originally due to restrictions imposed by Minsk. In December 2020, the Senate confirmed the appointment of Julie D. Fisher to be the first U.S. ambassador to Belarus in more than a decade. As of the start of May 2021, Ambassador-Designate Fisher had not yet presented her credentials to the government of Belarus.

In recent years, U.S. assistance to Belarus has focused on independent media and civil society, private sector development, and vulnerable populations. From FY2015 to FY2019, the United States provided a total of about \$49 million in obligated foreign assistance to Belarus. For FY2020, the State Department allocated \$9.67 million in aid to Belarus. The Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020 expresses the sense of Congress that foreign aid to Belarusian civil society "should be reevaluated and increased" and the U.S. Agency for Global Media should boost U.S. broadcasting to Belarus.

Sanctions

The United States and the EU have imposed sanctions on those they consider responsible for violence, repression, and election fraud. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has designated nine officials and four entities for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13405 of June 16, 2006, which established sanctions on those who engage in human rights abuses, corruption, or the undermining of democracy in Belarus. The State Department also has imposed visa restrictions on at least 109 Belarusian officials pursuant to Presidential Proclamation 8015 of May 15, 2006.

On April 19, 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced the revocation of a Belarus-related general license that had authorized U.S. persons "to engage in certain transactions with nine sanctioned Belarusian state-owned enterprises," including a major petrochemical company, Belneftekhim, and several subsidiaries. The license was granted after the Belarusian government released several political prisoners in 2015. Prior to 2020,

the United States also designated 16 Belarusians, including Lukashenko, pursuant to E.O. 13405. These individuals remain subject to sanctions.

The EU also has imposed sanctions in response to the current crackdown in Belarus on 88 individuals, including Lukashenko, and seven entities. In 2016, the EU lifted many of its previous sanctions for human rights abuses and undermining democracy in Belarus.

Relations with Russia

Belarus's closest security and economic partner is Russia. Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Russia and Belarus share an air defense system and frequently hold joint military exercises. Belarus also is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and relies heavily on Russian subsidized natural gas and oil and on Russian (and Chinese) loans. In addition, Belarus and Russia are members of a largely aspirational bilateral "union state" that formally came into effect in 2000.

Tensions between Belarus and Russia have increased in recent years, with the two countries at odds over energy, debt, trade, and transit. Lukashenko also has rejected Russian efforts to secure an airbase in Belarus.

Observers have speculated that Russian authorities are using the political crisis in Belarus to deepen the two countries' integration, something Lukashenko has sought to avoid. Since August 2020, the Russian government reportedly has provided Belarus with a few billion dollars' worth of new loans. Russian media and propaganda workers were deployed to support Belarusian state media when employees went on strike in support of the protests. Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia has increased, including a March 2021 announcement regarding the establishment of joint military training centers.

Many observers believe Moscow's preference is for a weakened Lukashenko to stay in power and remain dependent on Russia. Some believe Moscow might be satisfied by a political change in Belarus that would not reduce Russia's influence.

About half of Belarus's merchandise trade is with Russia. In 2019, Russia began to reduce subsidies for Belarus's crude oil imports from Russia, leading to a decline in Belarus's revenues from its own refined oil exports. Although the dispute was eventually resolved, Belarus began to seek alternative suppliers to supplement oil imports from Russia.

The EU as a whole is Belarus's second-largest trading partner, making up 20% of its merchandise trade in 2020. Less than 1% of Belarus's total trade is with the United States. Belarus's main exports are mineral fuels (mainly refined oil products, 14%), potassium fertilizers (potash, 11%), dairy products (9%), and motor vehicles and parts (8%).

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